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ABSTRACT

An introductory two-semester education course for preservice elementary school teachers addresses in the first semester the topics of childhood, and how the family and society relate to teaching. In the second semester topics include children in the classroom, teaching philosophies, and professional issues. Student writing is used as a feedback method and as a cohesive technique for drawing classroom materials together. Students submit three to five journal entries a week, choosing to write on topics related to the main instructional goals for a particular period, recording observations of children, or writing about something of current interest in their own learning. Faculty avoid "corrective" comments on matters of style or form and respond only to content. Four definite educational advantages emerge from "expressive-writing oriented" journals. They allow: (1) faculty to assess and respond to genuine student learning; (2) students to express themselves candidly and assimilate and apply classroom materials to their own lives; (3) faculty to meet individual personality styles; and (4) faculty to assess "authentic" writing skills and plan for writing help to be given in another part of the course as well as throughout the students' programs. (JD)

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EXPRESSIVE WRITING FOR PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING

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Faculty involved in an introduction to education course for pre-service elementary teachers at the University of North Dakota's Center for Teaching and Learning have addressed two instructional goals with the same technique and it has proved beneficial enough to be continued. The course, Center Seminar (dubbed "Sophomore Experience" by faculty to such an extent that the time-schedule now carries both titles), is a two-credit, two-semester course which addresses the topics of childhood, the family and society relating to teaching in the first semester, and children in the classroom, teaching-philosophies, and professional issues in the second.

The course was designed as a large group with 50-60 students co-taught by enough faculty and GTA's to provide small groups of 10-15 students. The general approach is large-group lecture, some by faculty from other disciplines such as sociology or psychology, and intensive small-group work on the issues being discussed.

Two problems identified by the faculty at large seemed to come together in this course. One problem was insuring student-participation in learning. Despite the small-group work, the large-group presentations gave enough of an air of impersonality to jeopardize the students' feeling of individual work. It may even have been seen, since the students came to it after much of their general education hours had been completed, as another lecture/lab procedure but without microscopes. When the faculty suggested that student writing could be used as a feedback method and as a cohesive technique for drawing classroom material together, the faculty had entered upon the controversies, some current and some not, of "the quality of student writing."

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Most of us are aware of the current complaints about student writing skills throughout the school system, blame being passed from one area to another, from one level of schooling to another. In seeking to address the issue of improving post-Freshman Composition writing in education courses, we ran into the usual problems attendant on such a task: student perception of "papers" as only another activity tacked on, faculty perception of time-problems in grading papers, and the general problems of non-English Department faculty having some responsibility for developing the skill of writing.

The use of "journals" was suggested and ultimately adopted, but not without some substantial revisions of thought on the faculty's part and a redefinition of that writing form. It seemed clear to us that the recent research on writing indicated the correcting of mistakes in formal writing assignments was not as effective on improving writing as other approaches. Two currents of writing-research came together for the faculty concerned.

One approach was that research which suggested more attention be given to the process of composition, to the steps occuring before, during and after the time the actual formal writing product exists. The work of Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, and Gordon Rothman were important resources in this area. The emphasis which was put on the "pre-writing" stages of writing--the personal notes, brainstorming, listing, rough-drafting, and the like--seemed to us to have been totally overlooked in our dealings with writing. Some education courses in the Center had adopted the practice of insisting on first-drafts so that students could rough out their ideas and not attempt to produce a finished piece in one sitting. This requirement certainly caused students to go through some pre-writing process but we discovered the fact, as we compared the first to the final drafts, that many students simply did not know <u>how</u> to

improve a rough draft other than mechanical editing. Several papers showed that the students' rough drafts tended to be conversational and direct; the same ideas for a final draft carried only a heavier vocabulary, extending some simple sentences to a paragraph of artificially "learned" proportions. The ideas presented were virtually unchanged.

Something else needed to be added to this emphasis on pre-writing and we utilized the scheme suggested by James Britton. This writing researcher divides writing into three categories: the "poetic," (independent verbal constructs that correspond to the basic literary genres, what we often call "creative writing"), the "transactional" (that writing which seeks outcomes in the real world and which includes book reviews, term papers, reports and essay exams in the school), and what Britton called the "expressive" (that self-expressive use of language which reveals the speaker, verbalizing his/her consciousness found in such products as diaries, journals, letters, and first drafts). Britton's team found that the transactional type of writing dominated the school curriculum and our faculty admitted its predominance in our own program. Thus, when "journals" were suggested as a method in our sophomore courses they were suggested with a great deal of awareness about what the form offered.

A constant activity in the sophomore courses, therefore, has been three to five journal entries a week. The students are allowed to choose from several divergent topics that relate to the main instructional goals for that period or to observe children and record these observations, or to write about something of current interest in their own learning.

The faculty were instructed to avoid "corrective" comments on matters of style or form and respond only to content. Such a response moves beyond the

traditional "instructional" role and into the "audience" role which, according to Searle and Dillon (Language Arts, October, 1980), involves such activities as extension, reaction and elaboration. While admitting that it served a useful role, faculty also had to keep themselves in check. In regard to form, a first sentence in one student's September journal entry ("My fourth grade teacher she had to break into small groups to do assignments so she could help us on a more personal level") was lacking only in the "my teacher she" construction. From the educational point of view, however, and from the reactive point of view, it was seen as more important to respond to the content. Thus the instructor's question on the entry ran: "How did she set up the groups? Same abilities? Was it really more personal, or just feel like it?"

NATURE OF JOURNAL ASSIGNMENTS

Each week students were given suggestions, drawn up by different faculty. One of our first problems was that we wanted the journal to be both "self-expressive" and "reflective." We discovered as the semesters unfolded that "reflection" was a difficult concept to explain and a harder one to practice.

Initially the journals were little more than diaries, notes of what happened and some reaction to it. We attempted to help this process by defining "reporting" as setting down an experience or idea, "reacting" as the addition of thoughts, feelings, and personal attitudes about what was reported, and "reflecting" as an analysis of those reactions, a wondering about causes or outcomes of the students' ideas or attitudes. Occasionally we asked for a report of an observation on one day, a reaction to it a few days later, and a "reflection" on it the next week. Dividing the activities by time seemed to clarify their distinct natures to students.

As an example, these four suggestions were given during a week in which the readings focused on the issue of discipline:

1. What does the word discipline mean to me? Why does it mean that to me? Where'd I get my ideas and feelings about the subject?

2. Jot down a remembered school experience involving a type of discipline and analyze what was going on in that situation. What type was used? What were the effects, the consequences? Why do you think the teacher used that type?

3. Are "freedom" and "discipline" opposites? Are they sometimes opposites and sometimes not? What do some people mean by "freedom?" What do others mean by it? Is "freedom" good? When?

4. Take one concept from your reading on "discipline" and apply it to your life now in college.

Some journal suggestions are quite course-related. A few more examples will perhaps suggest the range.

> "Do the kinds of roles described in the "Thwarted Discussion" selection also describe children's behaviors in the classroom? Discuss."

Some relate generally to the student's personal growth in relation to a course activity?

> "We have completed two weeks of looking at and attempting to understand groups dynamics and how groups work. Are you learning something about groups? What? Are you seeing your own membership in groups more clearly? What do you see? Is it where you would like to be?"

Some ask for the summoning up of personal memory:

> "Describe your parents or grandparents' life when they were your age now. (If you don't know, ask them.) Compare. What's the same and what's different? What might this say about education?"

Others are divergent and "creative" in nature:

> "Observe a child you can watch without interacting, carefully. If that child were a fully mature "alien" from another planet, what do you think would be some characteristics of that race of being or that culture?"

Before describing the benefits of this method, we must anticipate questions about our use of suggestions. Since the journal was a course-requirement, it could be seen as asking for writing of a transactional nature (that writing given in response to another) rather than a self-expressive one (simply verbalizing consciousness) in Britton's three-part division. We are claiming, however, that the students' performance in the journal entries clearly showed them to be self-expressive. Since elaborative or reactive comments were only on ideas, on questions the reader had, students showed none of the mechanical niceties or effusiveness or verboseness we had come to associate with their clearly transactional writing assignments. The casualness and candor with which they wrote suggested authenticity to us, and this authenticity proved to be the journals' greatest benefit.

BENEFITS OF JOURNAL ACTIVITY

Four definite educational advantages emerged from the use of "expressive-writing oriented" journals because of the authenticity of student response, a tone present and obvious in both the content and form. Students were remarkably candid about their opinions and the information they volunteered from their lives and this authenticity allowed:

1. faculty to assess and respond to genuine student learning;
2. students to candidly express themselves and, due to the nature of the journal suggestions, assimilate and apply classroom material to their own lives;
3. faculty to meet individual personality-styles; and
4. faculty to assess "authentic" writing skills and plan for writing-help to be given in another part of the course as well as throughout the students' program.

1) ASSESSING AND RESPONDING TO GENUINE STUDENT LEARNING

Compared to the material in the journal entries, formal writing assignments in other courses can be seen as students trying to predict favorable responses or grades from the teacher. Reading the journals, faculty could get a glimpse into what the students "really" learned, what they were actually assimilating from the course, and what they were applying in their lives or misapplying. Some of the first journal entries, particularly about why they wanted to be teachers, showed our students as having normal and laudable attitudes toward teaching. This is an example from a sophomore's first entry:

> I feel I choose to be an educator because I like the feeling of helping some one accomplish something. I want to share how I feel and what I can do with others. I specifically chose teaching Early Childhood Education because I want all young children to feel that they can do good and can learn anything.

Although such positive values are beneficial, perhaps necessary, for the teacher of young children, they are also culturally accepted values, particularly for women, and teacher-educators generally feel this base must be developed in a thoughtful manner with some degree of critical attention. But such general feelings as expressed above are less available to change and development if they are not expressed.

Another student, two weeks into the course wrote:

> I began tossing around "learning" in my mind today. Talk about a complex concept. Questions flooded me; why can some people learn things and others can't? Why can people learn some things better than others? Why can people learn one thing but not another? It goes on and on.

The faculty-reader of such a journal-note can assess that the student actually

is asking questions of herself. Although she did not continue this particular entry to attempt answers to those questions, we feel that the necessary and authentic question-asking process has begun. One is refreshed by the breezy "began tossing 'learning' around in my mind today." It seems more real than the language of a more formal paper such as "What is learning? Many people have tried to answer this difficult question...."

2) THE AUTHENTIC NATURE OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING ALLOWED THE STUDENT TO ASSMILIATE CLASSROOM MATERIAL, APPLY IT WITHIN THEIR OWN LIVES, AND CANDIDLY EXPRESS IT TO THE READER.

The nature of some of the journal suggestions has been noted earlier, that they were often of an assimilative or applied nature which helped the student seek further evidence of a concept or discover a concept. These first few sentences from a sophomore's journal exemplify such a discovery:

> I've studied Piaget before but I have never really noticed the different stages and I've never applied them. I remember my little boy and how he was at the different stages and I'm realizing this guy really knew what he was talking about. I really would not have noticed or observed if my own eyes had not been opened.

This student had had previous exposure to Piagetian theories but the action-oriented classroom method, and the availability of the journal to record responses, shows a new breakthrough in her understanding. The authenticity is underlined by her reference to Piaget as "this guy," instead of a standard formal reference such as "Jean Piaget was an important educational figure," which might be found as the introductory sentence to an essay-examination.

Another instance of application is the following:

> Well I didn't do too bad in my test. I don't think she's out to see how many we get wrong but to see what we got wrong and why. I'm always so apprehensive about tests, but she doesn't make me feel so bad. And she's really concerned with our learning. This reminds me of something we've discussed, about how children learn, and if we give them enough reinforcement, they are going to learn to understand the concepts.
>
> Now is she didn't give me reinforcement or positive feedback I would probably be feeling bad right now and I really wouldn't understand what she was talking about. She is the type of teacher I hope I can be some day. I would probably be trying to memorize this, instead of really understanding it.

The back-and-forth organization of this paragraph, viewed as a formal product, might blind us to the authentic fact that the student is applying what she has learned and doing so in her natural style: "This reminds me of something we've discussed, about how...." Such a "reminder" is much more authentic, much more real to the faculty-reader than a forced essay on application of a particular concept.

Another excerpt may give some of the same flavor:

> The article on listening really hit home with me. I never realized how many different ways of listening there are. I always thought you listened or you didn't.
>
> I would like to think of myself as a passive listener most of the time but I may more-than-I-like-to-admit fit into an active non-listener. I seem to have this passion to talk constantly, or else give advice or compare others problems to my own life situations which sometimes cuases me to miss out on what the other person is saying. I hope that after reading this article I will catch myself and start to be a better listener.
>
> I also know what it feels like to be with a passive non-listener. My boyfriend is like that most of the time. His mind is always preoccupied with other things. I think I'll ask him to read this article and see if it will help him realize how he listens to others. I hope it helps!

Unfortunately, we did not research the other entries in this journal to see if it did help her boyfriend, but the application of classroom learning to

life is apparent.

3) THE AUTHENTIC NATURE OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING AIDED FACULTY IN MEETING INDIVIDUAL PERSONALITY STYLES.

No entries were selected to illustrate this concept, but from the above selections, one can see that the coloring of a student's personal outlook will be visible to the reader. Faculty have thus been able to identify personality types (such as the eager generalizer, or the nay-saying critic) and respond to them individually as well as facilitating small-group discussions containing these students. In the three years of this program, we have found two students (originally identified through journal entries) who were ultimately counseled out of the program because of emotional disturbances. Examples of bias and prejudice are also remediable, because they are so freely expressed in this kind of writing, making the attitudes available to change from the faculty.

4) THE AUTHENTIC NATURE OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING ALLOWED FACULTY TO EVALUATE AUTHENTIC WRITING SKILLS.

Students, we discovered, have developed a variety of ways to mask writing deficiencies on formal products such as term papers, ways which are neither particularly illegal or unethical--a friend who is a good speller, for example--but expressive writing, not being concerned with such deficiencies, calls for what we might call the "authentic" or "real" writing skills of the individual.

Faculty can identify poor spellers or poor sentence-makers from the journal entries and occasionally counsel students to seek help from our English Department's Writing Laboratory or other resource. Organization--the smooth

development of thought throughout a paper--is, in the self-expressive nature of the journals, usually a problem. Again, this can be noted and watched for on more formal papers.

It should be mentioned in conclusion that on one occasion, when one or another version of the "writing problem" was sweeping through academia, a random batch of our sophomores' writing was analyzed holistically, mechanically, and by words per T-unit (a research method of assessing the amount of linguistic embedding in independent clasues). Our discovery was the the death of writing skill had been greatly exaggerated, and it served to boost the morale of faculty involved in this process.

GENERAL SUMMARY

Student participation, and evidence of that participation, in classroom activities and educational issues in general has been enhanced in our introductory education courses through the use of journal writing. Utilizing the consciousness-verbalizing advantages of what Britton calls "expressive writing," and by reacting helpfully and critically to content-issues rather than writing form, faculty have been able to observe the effects of that application, and assess student development and writing ability.